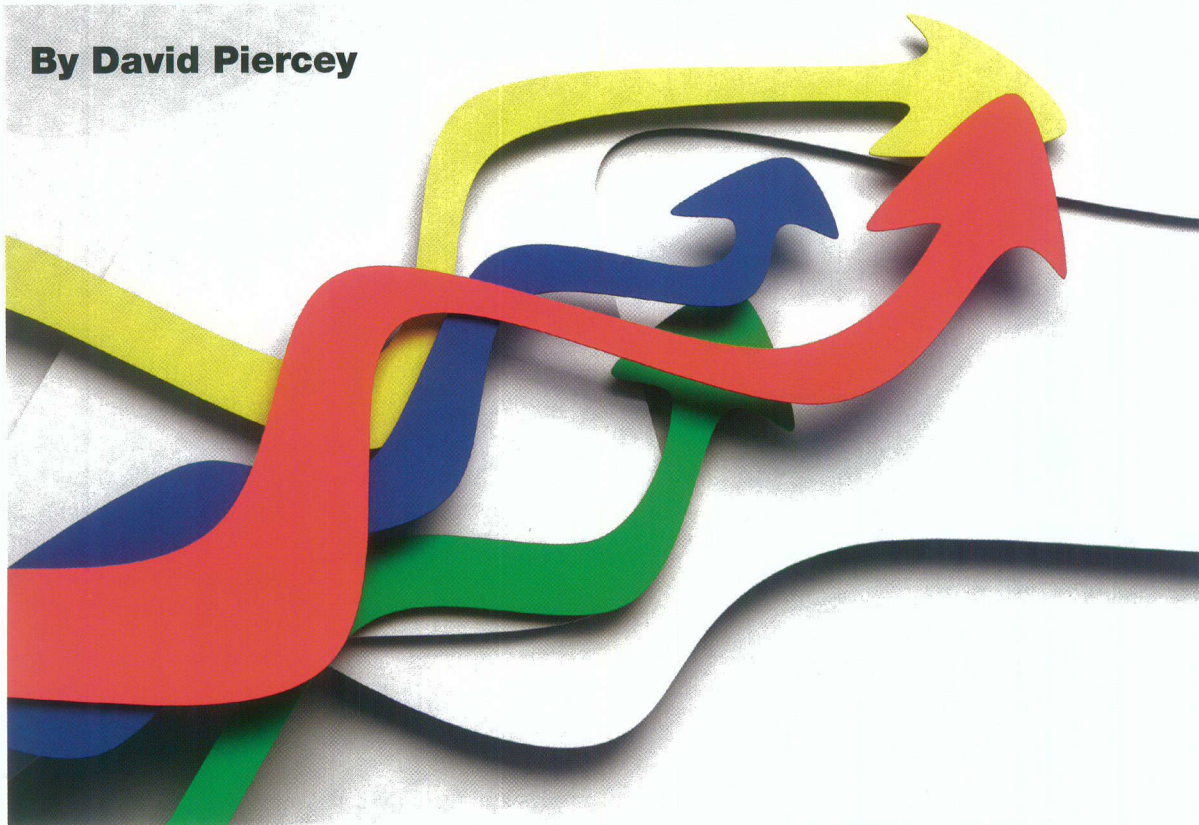


Why Don't Teachers Collaborate?

A Leadership Conundrum

If education leaders want teachers to collaborate more, then leaders must truly lead the way and model the collaboration that they want to see among teachers.

By David Piercey



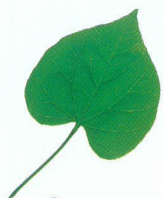
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Only an accumulation of individual changes will produce a collective solution.

— Carl Jung

Teacher collaboration is a prime determinant of school improvement. Unfortunately, though we talk about it a lot, we don't do it as much as we might hope for. We take pride and feel confident when we see a few random acts of collaboration in our schools. But the *modal* behavior in schools has changed little over the years.

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This is surprising because the professional literature, for many years, has provided strong evidence that collaboration works. Still, collaboration is more the exception than the rule.

Why should this be so? Why should something that's considered a best practice not be practiced as consistently as pedagogy demands? Why should we say we're doing something when, in fact, we may be resisting it? Why should our public pronouncements profess our support for these practices when our public behaviors sometimes seem to demonstrate the opposite?

Our natural reactions may sabotage our attempts at collaboration.

Part of our problem may be our language. Collaboration may simply mean different things to different people. Without making our assumptions clear, we may never fully understand each other's meaning.

For example, we often use the word "teamwork" to describe collaboration. We expect that we should operate as "highly effective teams." Yet, when we define it in practice, we often discover that we hold many different assumptions about what is an effective team. For many Americans, thinking of "teams" calls up images of football, a sport in which a star quarterback calls the plays and other players succeed in their positions by knowing their place. However, sports teams are simply not apt metaphors for professional collaboration, despite their intuitive appeal, because there is something much more *democratic* about collaboration, with many voices as equal contributors.

Even if we can't always readily agree on a suitable definition of what teamwork should mean, and thus what *makes* a good team, we all seem to have an appreciation for what makes a *bad* team. Patrick Lencioni (2002) describes five dysfunctions of an underperforming team: absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results.

Interestingly, Lencioni's characteristics of a healthy team — high degrees of trust, willingness to engage in conflict in open discussions, a commitment to clarity and purpose, holding one another accountable, and focusing on collective results — are strikingly similar to the characteristics of professional learning communities (DuFour and Eaker 1998). Unfortunately, these qualities are still not that common in our schools, even in schools that claim to have professional learning communities.

Of course, any change takes time, and any new behavior must overcome old attitudes. There are always early implementers of new practices; some are more enthusiastic and some are less enthusiastic or

Six conditions are necessary for collaboration.

Collaboration:

- Is based on mutual goals;
- Requires parity among participants;
- Depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision making;
- Requires shared responsibility for outcomes;
- Requires that participants share their resources; and
- Is a voluntary relationship.

Source: Friend, Marilyn, and Lynne Cook. *Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals*. New York: Longman, 1992.

even resistant. There also are many circumstances, particularly in the political arena, beyond our control that constrain our choices for school organization. Let us even acknowledge that our own skill sets in how to lead collaborative processes may be wanting. Still, even granting these realities, why don't teachers collaborate more?

ORDERING COLLABORATION

The professional literature continues to exhort teachers to use more authentic collaborative practices. But notice that teachers *are being told* that collaboration is how they should act.

Martin (2002) argues that, when leaders take charge of a situation, they too often convey an attitude of "I'm in charge" — with its corollary, "*and you are not.*" This "heroic" or "take charge" leadership style leads to "the death of collaboration" because it can elicit passivity and submission by subordinates. Subordinates may, in fact, abdicate more and more of their own responsibility and even feel increasingly marginalized, leading to increases in cynicism and distancing of self from the process. Collaboration thus becomes the first casualty in take-charge leadership.

The dominance and submissiveness in this kind

of leadership situation are natural behaviors. They're adaptations to conditions our early ancestors had to overcome. However, in today's society, such behaviors may no longer have an evolutionary advantage. Instead, our natural reactions may sabotage our attempts at collaboration.

Our organizational structures may also reinforce these behaviors. For example, teaching continues to be practiced within clearly hierarchical structures. Teachers report to department heads, vice principals, or principals; principals report to assistant superintendents, associate superintendents, or superintendents. Even the language of leadership — with terms that emphasize superordinate and subordinate ranks — might inadvertently promote attitudes we no longer wish to support.

Sports teams are not apt metaphors for professional collaboration, despite their intuitive appeal, because collaboration is much more democratic.

CONDITIONS FOR COLLABORATION

Though it may not be feasible to reinvent the words or organizational structures we use, we need to reconsider the relationships they promote. If we're to achieve better collaboration, we will have to develop some common understanding, some significant attitudinal shift, and the applications of some specific skills and processes.



"It's cool how they keep bouncing back."

Marilyn Friend and Lynne Cook (1992) argue that six conditions are necessary for collaboration. Collaboration:

- Is based on mutual goals;
- Requires parity among participants;
- Depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision making;
- Requires shared responsibility for outcomes;
- Requires that participants share their resources; and
- Is a voluntary relationship.

Achieving all six of those conditions in our current hierarchical school systems seems difficult. Nor is it likely that we'll have time in the current school day and school year for the required discussion and consensus building. Not that all this isn't possible, but it certainly appears daunting.

If leaders are to foster collaboration, they must first change their own attitudes toward leadership. The "Authentic Leadership" movement is based on the idea that the leader's self-realization and self-transformation are necessary before organizational transformation can occur. For this to happen, an attitude of servant leadership is necessary (Greenleaf 1977). The biggest obstacle is getting used to the idea that there is not just one chief and relinquishing some of the power one has in order to empower others.

Perhaps, then, the simplest answer to the question, "Why don't teachers collaborate?" is that their leaders *won't* collaborate or *can't* demonstrate and model the necessary attributes. **K**

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